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ABSTRACT

Accreditation is one of the institutionalized forces that now affects schools, colleges, and universities. Whether regional (institutional) or specialized (program specific), this form of evaluation has become well entrenched over the past 30-60 years. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the political/economic forces in the teacher education reform movement from the view of accrediting agencies with particular focus on that of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). (JD)

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THE VIEW FROM ACCREDITATION

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TEACHER EDUCATION REFORM:
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November 5, 1987

It is interesting, in recent history at least, how often our nation has turned to the schools whenever it has needed a crisis solved or when it has needed a ready scape-goat for trying times (Frymier, 1987, & Breinin, 1987). Whether sputnik driven science education needs, disaffected youth driven relevance needs, court driven integration needs, or the current industry driven literacy needs, schools have long been viewed alternately as culprit or savior.

Further, each cycle of reform seems to have its own complex of political/social/economic vested interests giving force and direction to it. Such interests belong essentially to those who hold sufficient power to force change whether the change be appropriate or not. Many of the recent reform driven initiatives are quite transparent in this regard; few of them, to date at least, are designed to have anything but a disruptive effect on the schools. The Tennessee Career Ladder program is a good example of just such disruption (Rosenholtz, 1987). There is fairly good evidence that the Tennessee initiative resulted in turning the light of blame for appalling poor education in Tennessee on the teachers and deflecting it from the real

culprits - the politicians and voters who refuse to adequately fund education in Tennessee.

One of the institutionalized forces that now affects schools, colleges, and universities is accreditation. Whether regional (institutional) or specialized (program specific), this form of evaluation has become well entrenched over the past 30 - 60 years. The purpose of this paper will be to discuss some of the political/economic forces in the teacher education reform movement from the view of accrediting agencies with particular focus on that of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

THE NATURE OF ACCREDITATION

Unique among the evaluation forms used throughout the world is that of accreditation, that quality control system of the private sector used to assure quality of institutions and of preparation programs in the United States. Most countries impose a governmental system of some kind or other in a model that is essentially regulatory. The non-governmental and voluntary nature of accreditation sets it apart in some very special ways.

One of those is that the various accreditation systems are largely under the control of those most affected by the evaluation. This brings to the evaluation a far more genuine commitment by the evaluatee than might normally be the case. Willing commitment reflects much more powerful motivation than does imposed regulation.

Also it means that the system, being under the control of those affected by the evaluation, is far more responsive to and vulnerable to the combined vested interests of those in charge of the accreditation. That is, the standards have generally demanded a maximum of what the evaluatees could bear and were more readily responsive to societal changes than systems under government control with their inevitably bloated bureaucracies and vested political interests. Such occurrences are readily visible in the history of NCATE (Christensen, 1982). The shift of teacher education accreditation from the American Association of Teacher Colleges to NCATE in 1954, the major revamping of NCATE in 1963 (following the University of Wisconsin brouhaha), the major restructuring of NCATE in 1973 (following the abrupt and forceful temporary withdrawal of the National Education Association), and now, the redesign of NCATE (following another major challenge by the large research/doctoral granting universities) all evidence this.

Accreditation, being voluntary, fails to attract all of the institutions or programs that are eligible. It is entirely possible that those institutions most secure in the quality of their offerings are the ones most likely to submit to accreditation. Also, there is evidence that the benefits derived from being accredited drives an institution's motivation to submit to accreditation at least to some degree. While called voluntary, the benefits to be derived or sanctions to be avoided are so great in

medical education evaluation, for example, that their accreditation can hardly be viewed as voluntary in the strictest sense.

Nevertheless, the voluntary and non-governmental nature of accreditation in teacher education makes for conditions that render it particularly responsive to societal and professional changes.

NCATE AND THE CURRENT TEACHER EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT

A particularly strident cry of the current education reformers is for accountability; accountability for teachers, accountability for teacher educators, accountability for students, accountability for administrators, accountability for colleges and universities, accountability for almost everyone except politicians and "hell-bent-for-leather" school reformers. Unfortunately, the operational definitions for such accountability appear simply to be the improvement and/or maintenance of standardized test scores for one or more of the parties central to the schooling enterprise. Regardless of the serious questions being raised about the validity and predictive power of such scores (Maddus & Pullin, 1987) and the fact that such kinds of accountability are driving students out of school in increasing numbers (Grough, 1986), the reformers are insisting on imposing these kinds of expectations on the teaching enterprise.

Such an initiative is clearly having an effect on the standards and procedures applied by NCATE. Standards in

effect prior to the current NCATE redesign effort, for example, stated that "The institution applies specific, published criteria for admission to its teacher education programs" (NCATE, 1982). The new standards relative to admission require that the institution "includes all of the following: (a) standardized basic skills proficiency tests for the basic program level;(d) successful completion of college/university course work with at least a 2.5 grade point (GPA) on a 4-point scale....." (NCATE, 1986). It could be presumed that these and other changes occurred as a result of the call for accountability and the ill supported charge that teacher education candidates come from the lower quintile of college students (Nelli, 1984).

Given the apparently political nature of the Holmes group report (Tom, 1987) and the fact that the NCATE redesign plan was generated by deans of the kind of institutions represented in the Holmes group, one might well understand that much of the content of both plans would be congruent to a rather substantial degree. The NCATE redesign was constructed by representatives of the Universities of Houston, Kansas, Minnesota, and Oklahoma; there was one representative from the NEA as well (AACTE, 1983).

Cited as a concern in the above mentioned report was the fact that the Association of Colleges and Schools of Education in State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (ACSESULGC) had expressed concerns that NCATE was criticized

by some of its members. Following an extensive study by Don McCarty of the University of Wisconsin the organization voted to remain in NCATE for five years and, "in the event that efforts to reform NCATE did not succeed, a new voluntary national accrediting association be established for the Land Grant institutions" (AACTE, 1983). Many other allegations about NCATE were cited as well even though most were unsupported by any formal investigations or reviews. The climate of criticism was very similar to that voiced in 1954 when NCATE was first getting started, in 1963 during the University of Wisconsin brouhaha, and in 1972 when the balance of power in NCATE was sharply modified by the overt actions of the NEA.

One of the results of the 1972 reformation was to change NCATE procedures so that a much broader range of the vested interests were represented and in a more representative fashion (Christensen, 1982). For example, teams of evaluators, prior to that time, were composed largely of persons from institutions like the one being visited; this was especially true of the teams that visited large research oriented institutions. Such institutions, because of their reputational and/or resource base indicators of excellence (Astin, 1987) controlled enough power in the organization to insist on such influence. As a result, few if any programs at such institutions were ever denied accreditation. With the change in the balance of power, the standards became the criteria for evaluation and, as a

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result, it was not any more uncommon for large institutions to suffer denial of programs than for other kinds of institutions.

As with earlier periods of discontent, the large institutions exercised their muscle and changed the nature of the system (Christensen, 1982). The changes proposed were the kind that it could be said would advantage those kinds of programs. Emphasis on quantitative measures, pressure to expand the program life space for teacher education, emphasis on available resources, and more sensitivity to reputations, are all part of the picture. Unfortunately, such moves push the evaluation processes further in the direction of utilizing inappropriate measures to determine institutional and program quality, reputation and resources (Astin, 1987) and further from measures to determine the efficacy of the institution in serving the needs of students.

The NCATE redesign effort, just like the recent school reform efforts (Bush, 1987), ignored the history of studies and reforms of NCATE. Formal efforts to study and determine the efficacy and acceptability of NCATE (Mayer, 1964 and Maul, 1971, etc.) during periods of discontent always resulted in surprisingly strong support for the system. Even the study done for ACSESULGC by Don McCarty in 1976, in its first report was extremely positive about NCATE. This was based on extensive visits by the researcher to various aspects of NCATE. The second report, the one that followed

the meeting of ACSESULGC members to respond to the first report was substantially more negative. It appeared that Don McCarty's findings did not fit the predispositions of many of the members.

It is perhaps too cynical to presume that the reform effort as viewed from accreditation is as blatantly political as if viewed from other positions. The power and effort of vested interests are clearly visible, however. Such is probably the case in most aspects of life, no doubt. One can only hope the interests of children, the ultimate beneficiaries of all our shenanigans, are not too badly trampled.

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